



Liberia

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

Despite frequent interaction among religious groups, some tension remained. There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Government promotes religious freedom by participating in and hosting interfaith events, supporting faith-based civil society organizations, and meeting regularly with prominent members of various religious communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 43,000 square miles and a population of slightly more than 3 million. It is estimated that as much as 40 percent of the population practices either Christianity or Christianity combined with elements of traditional indigenous religious beliefs. Approximately 40 percent exclusively practices traditional indigenous religious beliefs. An estimated 20 percent of the population practices Islam, which continues to gain adherents. A small percentage is Baha'i, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, or atheist.

Christian denominations include the Lutheran, Baptist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, United Methodist, African Methodist Episcopal (AME) and AME Zion denominations, and a variety of Pentecostal churches. Some of the Pentecostal movements are affiliated with churches outside the country, while others are independent. There are also members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) and Seventh-day Adventists. Christians live throughout the country.

The Muslim population is mainly found among the Mandingo and Vai ethnic groups. Vai live predominantly in the west, but Mandingo reside throughout the country. Ethnic groups in all regions participate in the traditional religious practices of the Poro and Sande secret societies.

A large number of foreign missionary groups work openly and freely in the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

There is no state religion. Government ceremonies open and close with prayers and may include the singing of hymns. The prayers and hymns are usually Christian but occasionally are Islamic. There was one Muslim cabinet minister, one Muslim Supreme Court judge, a few Muslim assistant ministers, and nine Muslim members in the legislature during the period covered by this report.

The Government observes major Christian holy days, including Easter and Christmas, as national holidays, but not Islamic holy days. The Government mandates that public businesses and markets, including Muslim businesses and shops, remain closed on Sundays and major Christian holy days, an issue that Muslim leaders have brought to the Legislative Assembly and the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court ruled that it was constitutional for the Government to allow market closures on Sundays on the grounds that markets needed to be cleaned once a week. There is no legal requirement to excuse Muslims from employment or classes for Friday prayers, although some employers do so.

All organizations, including religious groups, must register their articles of incorporation with the Government, along with a statement of the purpose of the organization. Registration is routine, and there were no reports that the registration process was burdensome or discriminatory. The Government does not require traditional indigenous religious groups to register, and they generally do not do so.

The Government permits, but does not require, religious instruction in public schools. Public schools offer religious education, particularly Christian education, but do not require it. Students can opt out of religious instruction, and parents may enroll their children in private schools for religious reasons. The Government subsidizes private schools, most of which are affiliated with either Christian or Muslim organizations. Some Muslims claimed that the 2006 national budget underfunded Islamic schools.

The Government has not specifically dedicated material resources to anti-bias and religious tolerance education. However, it is supportive of efforts to promote interfaith understanding. In October 2006 the President distributed bags of rice to the Muslim community during the holy month of Ramadan.

High-level government officials were required to take oaths when assuming their new office. Christians kissed the Bible, and Muslims kissed the Qur'an.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

Although some Muslims hold senior government positions, many Muslims believed that they need greater representation in the Government. Some Muslim leaders felt that certain Islamic holy days should be national holidays, since many Christian holy days are celebrated. In October 2006 some Muslim leaders asked the Government to mark the end of Ramadan as a public holiday. There was no government response.

On July 20, 2006, the Liberian National Police (LNP) Inspector General warned Muslim women not to wear veils in public but did not prohibit the use of headscarves. Muslim religious leaders objected, but there were no reports that Muslim women were discriminated against or arrested for wearing veils during the reporting period.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The Government successfully prosecuted five persons responsible for killing a man who refused to join a traditional religious society.

During the reporting period, government officials called for an end to ritualistic killings practiced by some indigenous religion adherents and vowed to prosecute offenders.

There were more interfaith prayers at government and public meetings. In July 2006 the President held discussions with Muslim leaders regarding concerns of the country's Muslim community.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Despite frequent interaction among religious groups, some tension remained. There were some abuses or discrimination

based on religious belief or practice. The Inter-Religious Council promotes dialogue among various religious communities. In February 2007 religious leaders helped mediate a legislative leadership crisis, which ended with the resignation of the Speaker of the House.

Ethnic tensions persisted between the Mandingo and several other ethnic groups, which were mostly animist and Christian. However, land disputes between them in Lofa, Nimba, and Bong counties were being resolved and did not become violent.

In April 2007 a newspaper reported that some members of the legislature said they would not vote for a Muslim to become Speaker of the House, referring to the one Muslim candidate who was contesting the election. Senators rejected the formation of a Muslim Caucus in May 2007.

Ritual killings, in which killers remove body parts from their victims for use in traditional rituals, reportedly occurred during the reporting period. There was little reliable information about traditional religious groups associated with ritual killings, and the number of such killings was difficult to ascertain. Many believe that practitioners of traditional indigenous religious beliefs among the Grebo and Krahn, who are concentrated in the southeast, engage in ritual killings. Body parts of a person believed to be powerful are considered the most effective for ritual purposes. In some cases the rituals reportedly involve eating body parts to gain special powers. Reports of alleged ritualistic killings came from all parts of the country. The Government treats ritualistic killing cases as homicide and investigates and prosecutes them accordingly.

In October 2006 the Liberian National Police and the UN Police found 37 persons who had been kidnapped, accused of witchcraft, and sentenced to trial by ordeal in Nimba County. In November 2006 the Ministry of Internal Affairs revoked all licenses of those who practiced trial by ordeal with the poisonous substance known as "sassywood."

On March 29, 2007, the Seventh Judicial Circuit Court of Grand Gedeh County sentenced five men to life imprisonment for the September 2005 beheading of Hastings Tokpah, who refused to join a traditional Poro society because he was a Christian.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Ambassador and other Embassy officers hosted events, including an iftar dinner on October 19, 2006, to discuss religious freedom issues with Christian and Muslim leaders. The Ambassador and other embassy officers participated in religious ceremonies and spoke at interfaith meetings to show support for religious freedom and interfaith dialogue.

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